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# Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan

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# Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan

## **Keywords**

Sudan, colonialism, gender violence, women

## **Disciplines**

African History | African Languages and Societies | European History | History of Gender | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Near Eastern Languages and Societies | Public History | Social History | Women's History | Women's Studies

*Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan.* By JANICE BODDY.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. xxvii + 402. \$65.00, hardback (ISBN 0-691-12304-7) \$24.95 paperback (ISBN: 0-691-12305-5).

“A Sudanese woman is like a watermelon, because there is no way in.” In the late twentieth century, this popular saying evoked the ideal northern Sudanese woman, who having been “circumcised”, had a womb that was sealed from the world and capable of producing “moral offspring” (pp. 111, 296). In the early twentieth century, British officials regarded the circumcised Sudanese woman differently. Horrified by the local practice of female genital cutting, which went far beyond clitoridectomy and required that women be cut open during childbirth, British officials set out to reform the custom. In *Civilizing Women*, Janice Boddy examines British policies towards female circumcision, which began with the establishment of a Midwifery Training School in 1921 and culminated in 1946 in an unenforced and ineffectual ban. This is a fascinating and richly detailed book that will stimulate debate for years to come.

Boddy focuses on the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1898-1956) but draws connections that go well beyond that. Thus she links what she calls a British colonial “crusade” against Sudanese female circumcision to the “highly visible international crusade to end female genital cutting” (p. 2) in the late twentieth century. She implicitly equates British interventions in the early twentieth-century Sudan with American interventions in Iraq today. The entire book, she writes, “is a protracted allegory for imperialism in the early twenty-first century” (p. 8), that is, for cultural imperialism in the name of civilization and human rights.

The book offers fascinating insights into what female circumcision has meant in northern Sudan, while advancing arguments to explain why British policies did so little to change the custom. “[F]emale circumcision was not an obsolete or isolable ‘trait’ that colonizers could extract from its matrix like a rotten tooth,” she argues. “Nor was it separable from male circumcision, however incommensurable the practices were to Europeans” (p. 200). Among women, the practice was valued as a means of protecting the mother and her womb “much as courtyard walls enclose and protect kin” (p. 111).

Boddy writes that British attempts to change this custom reflected a “clash of moralities” (p. 106) but her analysis supports the idea that divergent British and Sudanese attitudes reflected a clash of selfhoods. She suggests, convincingly, that most Sudanese did not regard themselves as “bounded individuals” but rather as “imbricated kin”; that they valued fertility over sexuality; and that unlike many late twentieth-century activists who came of age at a time when “medical contraception uncoupled sexual intimacy from reproduction”, they did not regard the clitoris “as a site of female pleasure and symbol of the unfettered individual in relation to the world” (pp. 310-11).

Less convincing are the author’s claims for a Christian agenda behind the British approach to female circumcision. For example, she calls Mabel and Gertrude Wolff, founders of the Midwifery Training School, “secular female missionaries” and suggests that their emphasis on hygiene in midwifery procedures reflected “the impress of Christianity, where washing clean is an idiom of social and spiritual ‘enlightenment’” (p. 210). The latter comment is a stretch, since Islamic cultures have historically placed an even greater emphasis on personal hygiene in everyday life. She frequently upholds Charles Gordon as an iconic patron of colonial crusades, but without noting that as a

Turco-Egyptian-appointed governor-general in Sudan (1877-80), Gordon himself forbade Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries from proselytizing among Muslims. She cites CMS efforts to open girls' schools in northern Sudan but does not connect these to the government's policies towards female circumcision. (Indeed, the sparseness of CMS records on this issue does not allow for this connection.) She implies that the policies and interests of missionaries and the British regime were coterminous, when they were not. Boddy's use of crusader discourse (including references to British officials as "knight-administrators" [p. 24]) would not matter if she were only claiming metaphorical crusades for social change, but in fact she portrays British policies towards female circumcision as part of a Christian-Muslim battle of cultures – even while casting doubt on the Islamic credentials of Sudanese female circumcision. Throughout the book she imposes a clash of civilizations framework on a colonial encounter that was more complex in practice than the popular British films and novels, which she describes, would indicate.

Citing a British document from 1945, Boddy mentions that some Sudanese women schoolteachers expressed a desire to stop female circumcision, beginning with their daughters. Likewise, she quotes in passing the Sudanese feminist Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, who sometime in the late twentieth century, described female circumcision as a "symptom, not a cause, of women's subordination" (p. 312). The mere fact that some educated Sudanese women considered eliminating the practice, or interpreted it as a symptom of female subordination, suggests that not all of them valued the ideal of the impermeable womb. Yet, Boddy does not pursue these leads regarding the reactions of educated Sudanese women towards circumcision, even though many in the postcolonial

period have written about the topic in Arabic or English. Instead, the only Sudanese women who “speak” in the book are those whose *zar* (spirit possession) ceremonies Boddy recorded during fieldwork in the 1970s and ‘80s.

Boddy remarks that the British misunderstood Sudanese values towards female circumcision “in ways that might have helped to steer effective reform” (p. 99). Nowhere does she propose what “effective reform” should have been; the tone of her work suggests instead that do-gooders should leave off their meddling. However, echoing a claim that has circulated among some anti-female-circumcision activists since the mid-twentieth century, she does write that “*sunna* circumcision” (meaning partial clitoridectomy, as opposed to the more radical Sudanese form) “is the only form of female genital cutting admissible under Islam” (p. 205). She also cites a Muslim doctor in Sudan who recently declared that all forms of female circumcision were “against Islam, insofar as they might reduce a woman’s God-given sexuality” (p. 312). Islamic authenticity, she implies, meaning an Islam based on scholars’ readings of the Qur’an and *hadith*, may be suitable grounds for “reforming” female circumcision today. Forget about encircling the womb, this version may go, the Sudanese practice is “un-Islamic” and good Muslims should abandon it. If Muslim activists do indeed use Islam to take on female circumcision, then a sequel to this book might one day be entitled, *Civilizing Women: Internal Jihads in Postcolonial Sudan*.

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